

# All About Pets

*The national pet care information service*



## BASIC HEALTHCARE



THE BLUE CROSS

*Britain's pet charity*

*It is wise to take an interest in canine health, but always think about your information source. Remember, there are lots of old wives tales about dog health! If in doubt, ask the vet. Never give human medicines to pets.*



## Neutering

All dogs have a right to a caring home and too many puppies grow up to become homeless dogs. For this reason all dogs should be neutered.

Neutering has health benefits as well. Spaying females under a year of age reduces the risk of breast cancer, the most common cancer to afflict female dogs. Unless spayed, older bitches risk developing a dangerous pyometra (a pus-filled womb). Spaying also prevents false pregnancy that can occur after a season (symptoms are moodiness and milk production). Drugs are available to suppress heat or prevent pregnancy after accidental mating, but these can have side effects.

In males, neutering makes both prostatic disease and some cancers less likely. There is also less risk from fighting or accidents while roaming.

Many owners worry that their pet will become fat after neutering, but this is easily prevented by correct feeding (*see the All About Pets leaflet, Staying in Shape (D7)*). Over-feeding, not neutering, is the real cause of obesity. Neutered animals require less food, therefore reduce the amount fed after neutering and weigh your dog regularly. Occasionally, older spayed bitches may leak a little urine whilst sleeping, but this can be easily controlled.

Neutering can be done at any age but, for the greatest benefit, should be done under one year of age. A bitch cannot be spayed during a heat, when producing milk during false pregnancy or after whelping. Your vet will advise on the exact timing.

## How can I tell if my bitch is in heat?

During a heat (or oestrus) a bitch becomes attractive to male dogs and, if mated, may become pregnant. One of the first signs is interest from male dogs. The vulva (genital area) at the back swells and there is a bloody discharge which later becomes clear. Some bitches lick this away, so if your bitch is licking, investigate. There is a risk of pregnancy throughout oestrus, therefore keep your dog on a lead.

## Help! My bitch has been “caught” by a male dog!

Injections can be given to prevent pregnancy, but must be given quickly (within a couple of days of mating). It is also possible to spay a bitch in very early pregnancy. Contact your vet immediately to discuss the best option.



## Vaccination

Vaccination can protect your dog against killer diseases, including distemper and parvovirus. Two initial injections are required, followed by annual boosters. Your dog should not be taken outside in areas where other dogs have been until the vaccination course is completed. Your vet can advise how long to wait.

However, research suggests it is beneficial for puppies to socialise (that is, learn to make friends with other dogs and people, and to cope with a range of situations and experiences) while young, before vaccination is complete. Discuss the risks and benefits with your vet. Many vets now run puppy classes where puppies can learn to socialise with minimal risk of disease.

Vaccinations may be controversial, but the diseases they prevent are still around and still kill. If you do not know if your pet has been vaccinated, it does not hurt to repeat the course.

## Worming

Roundworms may cause illness in humans and dogs. Puppies are infected by their mother; the worms live in the gut and shed eggs in the faeces (or excrement). Soil contaminated by faeces becomes a source of infection for both people and dogs. Puppies need worming fortnightly until 12 weeks old. Adult dogs should be wormed four times a year, when they are pregnant (check that the product is suitable) or feeding pups. All females should be wormed 30 days after a season.

Tapeworms, hookworms and whipworms are less of a health threat but treatment should be given twice yearly. Some tapeworms – which look like grains of rice in the faeces – are caught from fleas, so flea treatment is also necessary. A single tablet to treat all worms



can be purchased at the vet. In the case of pet shop products, check you are giving the correct dose for your dog's body weight and check which type of worm is controlled by each treatment.

## Flea control

Most dogs get fleas at some point, and they are most common in summertime. They can be hard to spot as they spend little time actually on the dog. Fleas and flea eggs can survive outdoors in summer. Regular treatment is recommended, especially for an itchy animal. A single application of any treatment is not enough for effective control – treatment usually needs to be repeated monthly.

The best treatments come from your vet. Pet shop and supermarket products are less effective. All dogs and cats in the household need to be treated as does the home (usually with a spray, although some treatments for pets help as well). Regular vacuuming reduces flea numbers, and the house should be treated after vacuuming as vibration stimulates hatching of flea eggs. Pay particular attention to dark crevices, such as down the sides of chair cushions and round skirting boards, as eggs accumulate in cracks. Remember to read all instructions for treatments carefully before proceeding.

## Grooming

Regular grooming is essential for all dogs, even short-coated ones. Weekly grooming reduces hair-shedding in the house. Long-haired dogs require grooming more frequently. Areas where the hair often becomes matted and soiled include the belly, backs of the legs and long hair surrounding the ears. If there is any discharge from the ears, consult your vet.

## Anal Glands

The anal glands are two scent-producing sacs that scent the faeces as they are passed. Sometimes they do not empty properly and can cause irritation of the bottom, which makes your pet lick this area a lot or “scoot” his bottom along the ground. The glands do not need routine attention but if there is irritation, see your vet.



## Dental care

Teeth are important and, just like people, animals benefit from regular dental care. Bad teeth heavily coated in plaque (containing bacteria) can spoil your dog's appetite and may spread infection elsewhere in the body.

Dirty teeth develop infections at the gum line and cause a foul smell. The gums recede and the teeth can loosen. Daily brushing will prevent these problems.

First, look inside your pet's mouth. The teeth should be evenly coloured – white or off-white. If they are grey or brown, it may indicate plaque accumulation. Is there an unpleasant odour? Are the gums pink where they meet the teeth or red and inflamed? Do the teeth surfaces look clean or is there a grey-brown coating, like kettle scale?

Unless the teeth look clean or your dog is under a year old, have the mouth examined by the vet first. Plaque in dogs is hardened by saliva, forming a concrete-like coating. Brushing will not remove this and it contributes to the accumulation of further plaque. An anaesthetic is necessary to keep your dog still while the plaque is removed with an ultrasonic scaler. The mouth can then be examined fully and teeth extracted if necessary.

Start brushing your dog's teeth from an early age, although it is possible to train an older dog to accept it. Toothbrushes designed for humans are not ideal. Dogs require a special brush and toothpaste from the vet or pet shop. Our toothpaste is too frothy and can cause stomach irritation. You can brush without toothpaste, but nice tasting toothpaste may help the process. Some toothpastes contain chemicals which slow the accumulation of plaque.

## Brushing your pet's teeth

Wait until your pet is relaxed before your first attempt. Start by handling the muzzle and rubbing round the teeth with your finger at first. Be sure to praise your dog for quietly allowing this. Do not take things too fast – try to halt the session before your pet gets bored or starts to struggle. Otherwise, your dog will discover that, by struggling, he can bring things to a close.

You can use a soft cloth, dipped in gravy for a nice taste, on your finger at first, then progress to the brush as your pet gets used to handling. Restrain the dog's muzzle gently in one hand (pressing too hard may provoke resistance). Do not open the mouth but slip your finger gently inside the lips. When this is tolerated, move on to using a brush at the next session.

Try without toothpaste at first, and then add toothpaste when your dog accepts brushing. Press the paste into the bristles so that it doesn't get licked off. Hold the brush so that the bristles are at an angle to the teeth - about 45 degrees.

You may be able to gently elevate the lip with your fingers to see the teeth. The aim is to brush each tooth, moving it in a circular stroke and including the region where the tooth meets the gum. Do about ten strokes on each tooth. Try to brush daily.

It is most important to brush the outer surface of the teeth and especially the big ones at the back. Do the inner surfaces if you can – getting your dog to hold a toy with the small teeth at the front may keep the mouth open.

Make sure you finish when your dog is still behaving well – keep the session short at first – and remember to always praise good behaviour.

## Healthy teeth

Other ways of trying to reduce plaque formation are less effective. A special diet is one possibility. It is often said that dried foods and biscuits are good for the teeth (although this view would surprise our own dentist!). Few have been studied to see if they really reduce plaque long-term.

There are, however, one or two types of dried food available through your vet where studies have shown effectiveness in plaque reduction. Some have a higher fibre content, which has a brushing action on the teeth as they are chewed. Others create an antibacterial coating on the teeth, which slows the accumulation of plaque. Ask your vet about the best option for your dog.

Dental chews may be helpful. Select something that is tough and chewy – avoid things that are hard as there is a risk they will damage the teeth. Chunks of raw vegetables are also good for your dog's teeth.

Daily brushing remains the best solution.



# All About Pets

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All About Pets provides expert advice, information and support for pet owners. It aims to ensure the welfare of Britain's pets by promoting responsible animal care. For further information and advice on caring for your pet or horse visit [www.allaboutpets.org.uk](http://www.allaboutpets.org.uk). Alternatively, you can write to us at the address below to request a list of available leaflets.

All About Pets is a service of The Blue Cross, Britain's pet charity, which provides practical support, information and advice for pet and horse owners. Through our network of animal adoption centres we rehome thousands of animals each year. Our hospitals provide veterinary care for the pets of people who cannot afford private vets' fees.

## How you can help

The Blue Cross is a registered charity and receives no government funding. We rely entirely on the generosity of pet lovers to help support All About Pets and other vital animal welfare projects. Any contribution would be most welcome. For more information on how you can help call us on 01993 822651 or visit our website at [www.bluecross.org.uk](http://www.bluecross.org.uk).



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